



OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL, CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY CENTERS UNITE TO HELP YOUNG CRIME VICTIMS

by Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott

REBUILDING YOUNG LIVES DAMAGED BY THE emotional and physical trauma of abuse takes a unified approach. For more than 25 years, the Office of the Attorney General has partnered with local, community-based organizations that serve the youngest crime victims.

One of those partners is Children's Advocacy Centers of Texas, a network of 68 centers throughout the state that are committed to helping the youngest survivors of crime. Each one of these Children's Advocacy Centers (CAC) provides a safe, nonthreatening environment that is designed to address each child victim's specific needs. At CACs, children encounter caring professionals who are trained to interview children about what happened to them so that authorities can fully investigate and prosecute the perpetrators of abuse. After the interview, children and their caregivers receive specialized medical and mental health services to address their trauma, as well as comprehensive advocacy services to help these young victims recover.

Bringing everybody together under one roof minimizes the number of times child victims have to tell their painful story. The people who need to know – law enforcement and child protection officers, medical professionals, prosecutors and others – get critical information during a single session, thus saving children from re-living the agony and trauma of the

crimes committed against them.

Many young crime victims are understandably terrified by the thought of facing their attacker in court – but CACs' loving arms are extended every day to these children. CAC professionals, who work closely with investigators and prosecutors, usher a child's case through the criminal and civil justice systems.

CAC staff might conduct weekly therapy sessions with a young victim and the victim's family – even take the family to the courthouse, where they can visit other trials and grow comfortable with the courtroom – or they might help a young victim's family apply for assistance through the Office of the Attorney General's Crime Victim Compensation Fund to offset expenses related to the crime. CAC's caring experts can also help a young victim complete a Victim Impact Statement to express how the attacker affected his or her little life. Throughout the process CAC professionals' goal is the same: minimizing the trauma to the young victim.

In early October, I met with Victoria Medina, executive director for the Children's Advocacy Center of Hidalgo and Starr counties. We toured Estrella's House, an Edinburg-based CAC, and discussed the facility's extraordinary efforts to help young victims of sexual abuse.

One of the biggest challenges faced by Estrella's House – and other CACs

statewide – is getting child abuse victims to come forward and report the trauma they have suffered at the hands of their abusers. To help address this problem and raise public awareness about child sexual abuse, CACTX in 2010 launched the "One With Courage" campaign.

We joined forces with CACTX on their "One With Courage" statewide initiative – encouraging adults to learn more about the signs of child sexual abuse so that they know how to respond if a child summons the courage and attempts to reveal the abuse. When children do come forward and report their traumatic experiences, CAC professionals help them begin to heal and improve their lives.

The Office of the Attorney General is proud to partner with CACTX and local centers like Estrella's House to combat the sexual abuse, neglect and assault of children. Since December 2002, we have provided more than \$76 million in grant funding from the Crime Victims' Compensation Fund to support CACTX – including Estrella's House.

Each child in our great state is a precious gift whose innocence must be protected. Together with Children's Advocacy Centers, law enforcement officers and communities across Texas, we can help our youngest victims of crime become hope-filled survivors.

-November 2013

POINTS TO REMEMBER



CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY CENTERS

The Texas Attorney General's Office partners with organizations around the state to help victims find help and healing. Services made possible by these partnerships include:

- Crisis intervention
- Counseling
- Victim hotlines
- Emergency shelters
- Accompaniment during court proceedings

For more information about Estrella's House, visit <http://cachidalgo.org/estrellas-house/> or Children's Advocacy Centers of Texas, Inc. at www.cactx.org.



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